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ABSTRACT

New studies dispel the fear that high academic standards set up some students to fail or drop out. This research finds that raising academic standards has a positive impact for all students in the following ways: (1) students take more demanding courses, learn more, and score higher on tests; (2) nationwide, dropout rates are falling and high school completion rates are rising; (3) students in more rigorous programs are more likely to go to and graduate from college, especially students from minority and low-income groups; and (4)students in more rigorous programs earned significantly higher wages and were more productive, effects that increased over time. Raising standards, with consequences, typically results in the following changes: elimination of bottom-track, low-level courses; provision of extra support for struggling students; and new ways of extending learning time (reorganized school days and school years). Although students may earn a lower grade in a harder course, they will be better off in the long run, in the eyes of colleges and employers. (MN)

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Positive Results for All Students Dispel Fears of Leaving Some Behind

If schools ask too much of some students, conventional wisdom says, they'll fail or drop out, right? This is the prevailing fear about rigorous academic standards and assessments — and it's not true.

Several new studies lay to rest nagging doubts that high academic standards unfairly set up some students to fail. Instead, the research empowers schools to ask students for more effort.

Results confirm that *all* students benefit when schools raise academic standards — and then follow through with a specific set of changes to help students meet them.

Unfounded Fears

The new research finds that raising academic standards with consequences has a positive impact for *all* students.

- **Higher student achievement.** Students take more demanding

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Schools are raising expectations for all students — and doing what it takes to help students achieve.

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Positive Results

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courses, study harder, learn more from the core curriculum and score higher on exams.

- **Lower dropout rates.** Nationwide, student dropout rates are falling, and high school completion rates are rising. Higher standards and more rigorous assessments have no negative effect on this trend. Schools that raise standards do *not* drive students away.
- **Increased college attendance,** especially for Hispanic and African-American students, for students from low-income families, and for students with low test scores. Students are more likely to go on to college, stay in college and graduate within five years if their high schools have prepared them with rigorous coursework.
- **Higher wage rates and long-term earnings.** Students who went to work immediately after high school earned significantly higher wages than those whose high schools did not require rigorous coursework. And they kept their pay advantage for the next five years. Student achievement directly correlates to workplace productivity. The effect of student achievement on wages and earnings, the reward for productivity, grows over time.

"Students know more and will end up being paid more," says John Bishop, co-author with Ferran Mane of *The New York State Reform Strategy: Raising the Bar Above Minimum Competency*, a research paper that details the findings.

Powerful Incentives to Improve

In schools, cities and states across the country, rigorous academic standards, assessments and accountability are proving to be powerful incentives for improving student achievement. Schools, teachers and parents are rallying around students to help them succeed. And it's beginning to work. Behaviors are changing — and that is changing teaching, learning and results.

In New York City and Rochester, N.Y., schools stayed open during winter break this year so students could keep learning. In Montgomery County, Md., teachers are making house calls to students who are struggling. In Chicago; Washington, D.C.; and Waco, Texas, school will be open again this summer for students who are behind. El Paso, Texas, schools have stopped tracking students out of the demanding core curriculum.

High-Stakes Test Lifts All Boats

The Bishop report examines data on the effects of minimum competency exams on students both in high school and afterward. These exams certify that students meet or exceed minimum standards in core subjects, such as reading, writing and mathematics.

In 1980, 49 percent of the nation's high school students were required to pass minimum competency exams to graduate. By 1992, 56 percent of all students and 79 percent of all Hispanic and African-American students were taking the exams.

Fears that the exams would drive students out of school have proven unfounded, according to the Bishop report. In fact, students who take the exams end up staying in school *longer* than students who don't. They are more likely to go on to college, stay there and graduate within five years.

Students benefit from better classroom teaching in their high schools as well. Schools that require curriculum-based, minimum competency exams are more focused on academics and student performance, have much higher expectations for teachers, have more teachers qualified to teach their subjects, and pay teachers more than schools that do not require the exams. This holds true in New York and other states as well as in Canadian provinces where the exams are required, Bishop says.

Moreover, the minimum competency exam has become important to employers, who value it as a meaningful signal of student achievement.

Abolishing the Bottom Track

Now, New York high schools are gearing up for even more rigorous academic standards for graduation — some of the highest in the nation.

The state is phasing in the Regents exams, once reserved for "elite" students, for *all* high school students. By 2003, all students will be required to score at the 55 percent level on all five Regents exams in English, mathematics (algebra and geometry), global studies, American history, and laboratory science. Once schools have adjusted to the exams, the Board of Regents intends to up the passing level to 60 percent and then to 65 percent.

Some high schools already are implementing an all-Regents curriculum. They effectively have abolished the bottom track. Gone are "consumer math," "vocational science" and "business communications." Now,

more students take honors, Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate classes in algebra, geometry, physics, biology, chemistry, English and American history, for example.

Expecting More, Getting More

Bishop's study finds that students in the all-Regents schools are defying the fears of teachers and parents that many students cannot master a rigorous core curriculum. Indeed, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are the biggest beneficiaries of high academic standards — the same students who had been tracked out of the core curriculum in decades past.

This study and others find that students who enroll in a rigorous curriculum perform at higher levels on standardized tests and other measures of student achievement. Moreover, gaps in achievement between white and minority students and between high- and low-income students narrow markedly when all students take a rigorous core curriculum.

Raising standards, with consequences, sets off a whole series of responses that ultimately change school behaviors, cultures and results.

Among the reports that come to similar conclusions are The Education Trust's *Education Watch 1998*; the Third International Mathematics and Science Study; *Exploring Rapid Achievement Gains in North Carolina and Texas* by the National Education Goals Panel; and *Education Week*'s *Quality Counts '99: Rewarding Results, Punishing Failure.*

Changing Behaviors

Clearly, raising standards alone is not a magic bullet for improving student achievement. But raising standards, with consequences, sets off a whole series of responses that ultimately change school behaviors, cultures and results.

A common set of responses contributes to student results once schools expect more from students.

- Schools eliminate basic, low-level courses and require students to take a more rigorous core curriculum. They effectively abolish the bottom track.
- Schools and teachers rally around struggling students, giving them extra support in ways that go beyond contractual agreements and traditional teaching practices.
- Schools extend learning time in a variety of ways: reorganizing schedules, school days and school years.

Each of these responses requires major shifts. Teachers need training and professional development to teach a rich core curriculum and reach struggling students. Materials need to be updated or replaced. Parents need to be informed and involved. Schedules need to be revised. Scheduling double classes, extra periods, block classes, summer school and winter school is becoming a fine art.

Anticipating the Reactions

Bishop predicts that there will be a "crescendo of complaints" once students start failing the Regents exams and have to repeat classes to graduate.

In the New York all-Regents schools, some parents protested that their former "A" students were not as successful in honors classes. As one principal says, "If you sit in a consumer math class you get a 90. If you sit in a sequential math class, you have to struggle to get a 65."

The plight of struggling students inspires schools and teachers to invest more time and resources in them to succeed. "There's a lot more contact between teachers and students, particularly for struggling students," Bishop says. Teachers voluntarily worked beyond their contract requirements to tutor students in study halls, after school, in the evenings and over holiday breaks.

Still, the all-Regents curriculum and exams remain a challenge. "This is a very high standard for lots of kids," Bishop says. "But even the kids who don't end up getting the Regents diploma will end up learning more."

And that, after all, is the point.

To Learn More

The New York State Reform Strategy: Raising the Bar Above Minimum Competency is on the Web at www.ilr.cornell.edu/depts.cahrs/rsrch.htm. ●

What Happens When Schools Raise Standards?

The latest research underscores two important points about the consequences of raising academic standards:

- **First, some students will struggle in harder courses.**
- **Second, they will be far better off for it in the long run.**

Earning a 65 in a rigorous honors class is more valuable in the marketplace than earning a 90 in a basic, bottom-track class. Colleges and employers understand that students who take harder classes know more and are able to do more — even if they have a lower score.

The latest student results clearly demonstrate this reality. Students who are held to higher academic standards are more likely to succeed in college by earning a degree and on the job by earning more money. In today's economy, these are the results that matter.

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The National Alliance of Business is the only national, nonprofit, business-led organization focused solely on human resource issues. The Alliance and its member companies are leading efforts to improve American education, build bridges from school to work, expand lifelong learning opportunities for all workers, and implement workforce development and job-placement systems that meet the needs of employers and job seekers.

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JCPenney Leadership Institute on School Improvement

Quality in the Classroom: How Students and Teachers Co-Manage Their Learning Processes

May 6, 12:45–3:30 p.m. Central Time

Discover how innovative school districts are helping their students develop into lifelong learners who accept responsibility for improving their performance. These schools have customized the criteria from the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award and are using these tools to improve education in their communities. The result? Scores on nationally normed tests have jumped 20 percent in two years, with a comparable decline in discipline problems.

The teleconference will include an overview of how all communities can use the quality process. Plus, hear from students, teachers and principals from Azalea Elementary School in Pinellas County, Fla., and New Bern High School in Craven County, N.C.

The JCPenney Leadership Institute on School Improvement is a partnership between JCPenney and the National Alliance of Business, in cooperation with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. The Institute is offered as a community service free of charge to anyone with access to a satellite downlink. However, sites must pre-register to participate in the live teleconference and to receive written materials in advance. This is the seventh program in the series, which is designed to reinforce local education improvement initiatives with business support.

For more information, call 800/787-2848.

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